



EPIP Boston Breakfast Discussion

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ARTICLE: [Sunrise Movement is Shaking Up the Climate Debate. Will More Funders Pay Attention?](#)

by Tate Williams for [InsidePhilanthropy.com](#)



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ❖ How can philanthropy, which is notoriously slow moving, have a role in more fast-paced cultural movements?
- ❖ How do we bridge the disconnect of unpredictable social movements and the need for benchmarking and clear deliverables often imposed by funders?
- ❖ How do you think movements fueled by young people can gain traction with veteran philanthropists and long-standing board members?
 - How can philanthropic organizations be bold and integrate new movements and ideas in the face of more traditional and/or conservative leadership, board members, trustees, etc.?
- ❖ Can we, as young philanthropists, lend legitimacy or support to our young peers on the nonprofit side? How?
- ❖ Does your foundation believe in the grassroots organizing-based theory of change? Does your foundation invest in high-risk grantmaking?
- ❖ With so many people taking part in the Green New Deal conversation, how do we ensure that people of color and those in frontline communities get a seat at the table?

ARTICLE TEXT:

Within a couple of months and with just under \$1 million raised, the Sunrise Movement has become one of the boldest voices in the national climate debate, and the Green New Deal it's advocating has raised the bar for climate change policy discussions.

The organization is now determined to last, looking to grow its budget, team (currently at 16) and influence in 2019, including talks with new potential funders, says William Lawrence, co-founder and development director. Whether or not philanthropy throws serious weight behind the group going forward, there's a lot the sector might learn from its rise, and how the scrappy, movement-building approach of groups like it can make a big impact.

"What's been nice about [the past month] is that our impact is incredibly clear and everybody is seeing it, because of the way we've been able to put truly ambitious and truly equitable climate action on the map in a way that nobody expected," Lawrence says. "That's opened some doors that might have been closed before, because people are seeing the value of movement building."

The group of young activists isn't working alone, and some stars definitely aligned in its favor. Incoming Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez made a surprise appearance at their November 13 protest at now-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's office, helping to put the group on the map. Ocasio-Cortez then championed the Green New Deal—a massive jobs and infrastructure proposal to decarbonize the national economy—now backed by more than 45 House representatives, and hundreds of organizations (Justice Democrats is the other big organizational champion). While the Green New Deal is already facing pushback from Democratic leadership, it's sparked an unexpected level of momentum around climate policy.

But Sunrise did not stumble into success. Officially launched in April 2017, Sunrise grew out of earlier activism around the fossil fuel divestment movement. A group of young organizers wanted to get more ambitious, and set out researching historic examples where "inconceivable change happened in very short amounts of time," Lawrence says.

What they ended up with was a decentralized organization that tackles climate change and economic inequality together, emphasizes grassroots organizing and nonviolent direct action, and is not afraid of getting some people arrested. Salaries are based on what staff tell the organization they need to support themselves, and the strength of their network is largely through young volunteers based in hubs around the country, rallied via online organizing and group video calls, now regularly numbering in the hundreds. It's a formulation that builds on recent social movements like 350.org and the push for divestment, Occupy, the Movement for Black Lives, as well as other examples from history.

The group raised just under \$1 million in 2018 between its 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) entities, and received early support from a set of core funders that have since stuck with it. Wallace Global Fund, which was instrumental in the fossil fuel divestment campaign, funds Sunrise, as do the Rockefeller Family Fund (one of the smaller foundations associated with the oil family), and the Winslow Foundation, run by Wren Winslow Wirth, who is married to former politician Tim Wirth. Institutional funders made up about 55 percent of its 2018 budget, with 35 percent coming from individual donors, and the rest from nonprofit partners.

Sunrise is currently fundraising via email, house parties (another time-tested grassroots tool), and grantseeking, and it saw a surge in donations late in last year after the protest at Pelosi's office.

"From Capitol Hill to partnerships to the number of people who want to be involved at the grassroots, the growth has been immense on all fronts," he says. Since November 13, Sunrise has picked up 1,140 new monthly donors, and had 90 new volunteer hubs pop up in six weeks, now based in 33 states. Even as it plans to grow, Lawrence says the group has some key principles that it doesn't want to change. The majority of staff will always be grassroots organizers, and they always want to be fueled by a swell of volunteer activists.

“We believe at our core that the only successful social movements in American history are powered by the unpaid effort of tens of thousands of people, and we’ve always strived to build an organization that wasn’t asking how many staff can we hire, but how many people can we engage as volunteers,” Lawrence says.

The group has a goal of raising \$2.5 million for 2019, which will allow it to staff up, and it hopes to execute a handful of special projects if it has additional money. While not ready to name funders, the surge in momentum has allowed Sunrise to begin talks with new potential institutional funders that it hopes will pan out.

But at this point, what you might think of as the philanthropic establishment has yet to jump on board. In fact, the group looks quite a bit different than the favored organizations of leading green funders.

“I think for certain funders, the grassroots organizing-based theory of change is a little foreign to them, and they don’t know how to make sense of it, and maybe they’re a little skeptical that it’s going to add up to real impact,” Lawrence says.

While social movements have proven to spark major political and cultural shifts with increasing speed of late, the philanthropic sector often finds itself playing catch-up in this realm. We’ve seen some progress, but research in recent years reports that green philanthropy has underfunded social justice and grassroots strategies (part of a larger trend in the sector). Related, the field tends to be top-heavy, disproportionately funding a relatively small set of major green NGOs. Consider that the EDF, for example, raised \$223 million last year, and the Nature Conservancy saw \$760 million in dues and contributions.

So perhaps the spotlight on the Green New Deal provides an invitation for the funding establishment to consider, not only this one organization that has struck a nerve, but others like it that are working on a grassroots movement for more radical climate action and seeing results.

Aside from its ground-up strategy, one insight to be gleaned is that Sunrise and the Green New Deal starts, not with the most politically feasible policy, but the one that would actually reach the end goal of averting the worst climate disaster. Sure, it’s a long way from any kind of passage, but presenting a highly ambitious plan ignited a surprising level of excitement around climate policy compared to approaches like cap-and-trade or a carbon tax.

“I would love to see a stance from philanthropy that really recognizes the scale of the crisis and the speed with which we must transform this country if we want to avert catastrophe,” Lawrence says. That’s risky for funders, he adds, because clearly, no grantee can promise a massive overhaul of a nation’s infrastructure and economy, or present quarterly deliverables that track exactly toward that outcome.

“But that is exactly what we need to do. So you have to invest in risky strategies, and even modest investments... in risky strategies and in movement-building strategies will result in outcomes that people can hardly imagine now.” (The Climate Mobilization Project is another scrappy group that wants to radically alter the debate over how to respond to climate change.)

An additional signal that funders might pick up from Sunrise’s surge is that these young people did not come out of nowhere. In many cases, they are products of past investments philanthropists have made in grassroots strategies, Lawrence says.

“We have been trained and supported and coached and mentored by so many organizations over the years who were not necessarily delivering the shiniest outcomes, but were doing deeply impactful leadership development work that has shaped us as leaders and allowed us to build something like Sunrise that is having the impact that we now see.”

In one way, funders that want to build on the success of Sunrise could look not just at making a grant to the group itself, but to backing the kinds of training that make more moments like this one possible.